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ABSTRACT

Using a revised version of the Situation Attitude Scale (W. Sedlacek and G. Brooks, 1969), the attitudes of White student services practitioners toward Asian Americans were explored to determine if White student affairs practitioners at the University of Maryland differed in their attitudes in situations where a student's race was specified as Asian American and in situations in which race was not specified. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the data, scale responses of 59 student affairs professionals. Results indicated that the attitudes of White student affairs practitioners toward Asian Americans differed significantly from attitudes toward students whose race was not specified. A closer examination indicated significant difference for 3 of 12 scenarios. In these situations, White student affairs practitioners expressed more positive attitudes toward Asian Americans. Though these results may seem to be desirable, they indicate that the attitudes of White student affairs practitioners are influenced by the racial/ethnic background of Asian Americans. This may indicate that perceptions of Asian Americans as a model minority may still exist. Differences in treatment of a group that are based on stereotypical beliefs, regardless of their perceived positive nature, limit opportunities and experiences and result in psychological distress. Some suggestions are given for student affairs practice. (Contains 1 table and 31 references.) (SLD)

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Office of Vice President for Student Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

College Park, Maryland

Attitudes of White Student Services Practitioners

Toward Asian Americans: Research and Recommendations

Chris Liang and William Sedlacek

Research Report # 2-00

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Summary

Using a revised version of the Situation Attitude Scale (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1969), the attitudes of White Student Services Practitioners toward Asian Americans were explored. The focus of this study was to determine if White Student Affairs Practitioners at the University of Maryland differed in their attitudes in situations where race is specified as Asian Americans and in situations where race was not identified.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized to analyze the data. Results of this study indicated that the attitudes of White Student Affairs Practitioners at the University of Maryland, College Park toward Asian Americans differed significantly when compared to people whose race was not identified. A closer examination of data indicated significant differences in three of the twelve scenarios. In these situations, White Student Affairs Practitioners expressed more positive attitudes toward Asian Americans. Though these results may seem to be desirable, what they indicate is that White Student Affairs Practitioner's attitudes are influenced by the racial/ethnic makeup of Asian Americans. Further, this may indicate that this perception of Asian American as Model Minority may still exist. Difference in treatment of a group that is based on stereotypical beliefs, regardless of their perceived "positiveness", serve to limit opportunities and experiences and result in psychological distress. Suggestions for practice are

Over the past 30 years, the discussion on racial diversity in higher education has centered on four areas (1) retention (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tinto, 1993); (2) campus climate (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000); (3) prejudicial attitudes of one group toward another (Ancis, Choney, & Sedlacek, 1996); and more recently (4) the multicultural competency of professionals in student services (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2000; McEwen & Roper, 1994).

In recent years, administrators have begun to understand that increased enrollment of students of color alone is not enough to create a positive multicultural environment. As such, higher education has been experiencing a shift in its work toward multiculturalism. Institutions are moving from solely increasing the number of students from diverse backgrounds to implementing programs and services aimed at changing campus environments (Valverde, 1998). Student affairs professionals have also expanded their role to include developing services and programs that are sensitive to the developmental needs of all students.

Many look to student affairs professionals to develop and encourage inclusive activities and events, provide opportunities for interracial dialogue, and create environments where all students can achieve academically, develop as culturally sensitive individuals, and feel safe (Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Reynolds & Pope, 1994). Many key professional and ethical documents stress the importance of developing environments that are diverse, where students can learn from differences (American College Personnel Association, 1993; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987). However, research in the area of multicultural preparedness, defined as knowledge, skills, behavior, comfort, and experiences, or racial attitudes of student affairs professionals, is limited (Hoover, 1994).

Some researchers have suggested that student affairs professionals may not have sufficient knowledge to work effectively with a diverse population (McEwen & Roper, 1994).

Hoover's (1994) study confirmed this by finding lower levels of multicultural preparedness among student affairs professionals in working with racial minority or gay/lesbian/bisexual students than with women and nontraditional aged students. The preparation of student service professionals in the area of diversity is important in creating an environment where the needs of racial minorities will be met (Pope, 1993;1995; Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Reynolds & Pope, 1994).

Understanding the degree of affect of one group toward another (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997) is also crucial in understanding group interactions (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1970). Given the role of student affairs professionals as facilitators of multiculturalism on our college campuses, it is important to understand their attitudes in their work with diverse students. The primary purpose of this research was to examine the attitudes of White student affairs professionals toward Asian Americans. It was hypothesized that such professionals would hold differential attitudes toward Asian Americans than to other groups. Asian Americans were selected because they represent a growing numerical racial group in higher education. Furthermore, Asian Americans as a group are not well represented in higher education research literature. Hune and Chan (1997) explained that the stereotype of Asian Americans as a model minority, a successful group without needs, has served to divert attention away from this ethnically diverse group.

White student affairs professionals were chosen as the target sample for several reasons. While the number of student affairs professionals of color is growing, their White counterparts represent an overwhelming majority of professionals in the field. For instance, as of May 2000, the American College Personnel Association's membership consisted of 73.3% Caucasian; 10.7% African American; 2.8% Asian American or Pacific Islander; 3.4% Hispanic or Latino;

1.1% Multiracial; 0.3 % Native American; 1.5% Other; and 6.9 % unreported (L. Mihalik, Personal Communication, May 15, 2000) . Second, the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of White individuals, by virtue of their majority status, have more of an effect on minority populations than racial minorities have on Whites or on other minorities (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976).

Method

A sample of 164 White staff members (46% male, 54% female) who were employed in the division of student affairs at a large public mid-Atlantic university were sent either the control or the experimental form of the Student Services Questionnaire (SSQ). A total of 70 surveys were returned representing a 43% response rate. Of these returned surveys, 59 were usable (54% women; 46% men). Twenty-four of the usable surveys were the control form while thirty-five were the experimental form.

The SSQ, which was developed to measure the attitudes of student affairs professionals toward Asian Americans, is a revised version of the Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) and employs an experimental design. In order to exact the conditions of an experimental design, at least two forms of the SAS are required. The only difference in the forms is the use of a group referent, a trigger word that identifies the target group (e.g. Arab, American Indian, Black) that is inserted into the situations. The control form does not have any reference to a group. In the control form (no-group specified), an example situation would read "A family moves next door to you." In the form with the group identified, the trigger word is included and the situation would read "A Black family moves next door to you." Respondents are instructed to then select a rating on 10 separate bi-polar semantic differential scales that best describe his or her feelings toward a particular situation. A comparison of the means of each form allows the researcher to

determine if differences in responses are a result of the presence of the trigger word. Participants are not informed that alternate forms exist.

The SAS was originally developed to measure the attitudes of White students toward Black students (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1969). Sedlacek and Brooks (1970) designed the SAS in order to measure attitudes while limiting the psychological withdrawal or avoidance of participants from racial components and to control for socially desirable responses. In their original study and in subsequent research, various versions of the SAS have asked participants to respond to 10 five-point semantic differential scales that are listed under10 separate situations. This instrument has been revised to measure the attitudes toward many groups, among them, Arabs (Sergent, Woods, & Sedlacek, 1992), Blacks (Balenger, Hoffman, & Sedlacek, 1992; Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1984), Black clients (Stovall, 1988), Hispanics (White & Sedlacek, 1987), American Indians (Ancis, Choney, & Sedlacek, 1996), Jews (Gerson & Sedlacek, 1992), lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (Gammon, 1996; Washington, 1993).

The items of the SSQ were developed through a brainstorming session with 8 graduate and undergraduate students with expertise and experience on issues of racial climate and professionals in student affairs. This focus group was needed in order to develop situations that were specific to the experiences of Asian Americans.

Members of the focus group decided that the term "Asian American" was the most common term used by the student affairs professionals at this particular university. According to Sedlacek (1996), the group referent employed should be the term most commonly used by the respondents rather than that preferred by the researcher. The focus group then decided on situations thought to engender positive or negative stereotypes of the target population (Asian Americans). Situations were related to both the stereotypes that people of Asian descent

encounter and the field of student affairs. Twelve situations were developed and used for this current study. An example of the situations on the control form, the "race unspecified" scale, is "A student offers to fix your computer". Experimental forms differed in the introduction of the stimulus: the trigger word. The same situation on the experimental form would therefore read "An Asian American student offers to fix your computer".

A form of the SSQ (Control or Experimental) was randomly distributed into packets containing the demographic questionnaire, a cover letter, and return envelope. Email, post card and telephone follow-ups were employed.

Results

Reliability coefficients (Cronbach alpha) for the situations on the SSQ ranged from .62 to .95 and were similar for each form, except for situation 11 on the Asian American form which was .39.

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance was significant at the .05 level for form main effects (Wilks Lambda). Follow up univariate F tests indicated significant differences in three of twelve situations.

Student affairs professionals indicated more positive responses on the Asian American form than on the neutral form for situation # 3 (a student offers to fix your computer); situation # 5 (you see a group of young men loitering by your car); and situation # 7 (the University's president has just announced the selection of a new vice president of student affairs) (See Table 1 for complete wording).

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Discussion

That student affairs professionals may have more positive attitudes toward Asian Americans than when race is not considered has important implications for how we engage in student affairs activities. For example, in situation # 3, respondents felt more comfortable having an Asian American fix their computer than when race was not identified. While this may seem positive, it supports a stereotype that Asian Americans are experts in technical subjects. As an illustration of possible problems this could cause, one of the authors had to refer an Asian American student for counseling because his peers insisted on seeking computer-related help from him to the point where he had virtually no interpersonal relations on any other basis, and he began to get depressed. The student wasn't particularly interested in computers, but everyone expected him to be. Forcing our expectations on people from other races is a form of racism, even if that expectation appears to be positive (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976).

Results of past studies utilizing the SAS methodology have yielded significant differential attitudes among participants in situation # 5 (you see a group of young men loitering by your car) (Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1984; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1969; White and Sedlacek, 1987). This study showed similar results. However, while the results of previous studies indicated that respondents held more negative attitudes toward a group where race was specified, it was found in this study that respondents felt safer and more relaxed around a group of young Asian American men loitering around their car than when race was not specified. Thus, it appears that Asian American men are perceived to be less of a threat to one's personal safety than when an individuals' race is not specified.

This result could be based on a perception of Asian Americans as peaceful, docile, or perhaps, less intimidating physically, and therefore less of a physical threat. Another

interpretation could be based on the idea that Asian Americans are academically and financially successful, thus less likely to engage in threatening behavior. Attitudes of student affairs professionals toward Asian Americans may differ depending on the region of the country. For instance, stereotypes of Asians/Asian Americans as being in gangs or skilled in martial arts are not uncommon in California or New York City. Student affairs professionals in these areas may report more negative attitudes toward Asian Americans in this situation.

Student service providers also indicated more positive attitudes toward the hiring of a new vice president of student affairs who was Asian American when compared to hiring a new vice president whose race was not identified. Leong and Schneller (1997) found that undergraduates reported positive feelings toward Asian Americans being elected to student government positions. Leong and Schneller (1997) hypothesized that their respondents may have felt that Asian Americans are above average in intelligence, achievement oriented, and competent and successful, which are attributes of a leader.

Given the preponderance of popular media reports of Asian American success stories, with discussions of their high academic ability and financial attainment, and moral standards that influence their good behavior (Hune & Chan, 1997), it is not surprising that students or student affairs professionals maintain these beliefs about Asian Americans.

At first glance, attitudes in the positive direction may be construed as harmless. However, Hune and Chan (1997) suggested that attitudes based on stereotypes that depict Americans of Asian descent as well adjusted, without academic or mental health needs, has hurt many Asian Americans, particularly Southeast Asians. The assumption that Asian Americans are financially stable overlooks the economic difficulties that many Southeast Asians, particularly refugees, are experiencing. While a belief in the "high achieving, well behaving

Asian" is seemingly positive, Ancis et al. (1996) remind us that differences in an apparently positive direction do not necessarily suggest that prejudicial attitudes are absent.

Information regarding the experiences and stereotypes of Asian Americans can also be gleaned from scenarios where no significant differences were found. The absence of differential responses in certain situations may yield important information as well. No significant differences were reported for situation #2 (a student is worried about how her parents will react to his or her decision to switch majors); and situation #11 (a student you work with is upset about a "B+" he/she received on an exam). This may be indicative of persisting cultural insensitivity.

The strong influence of parents on an Asian American's career decisions and academic performance has been documented (Leong, 1998). A practitioner who does not understand the impact of parental influence on Asian American college students and decides to treat academic or career issues the same for all students, may not completely understand the stress and anxiety that the student could be experiencing.

The lack of significant differences may be an indication of an increasing acceptance of Asian Americans. For instance, no significant differences were reported for situation # 12 (your best female friend has just become engaged). This finding contradicts Leong and Schneller's (1997) report of more negative feelings in a similar situation that posed a "blind date" scenario. Given that Leong and Schneller's report was based on data collected in 1986, it is conceivable that interracial dating has become more acceptable in society in the past fifteen years.

Since this research was conducted on only one campus, generalizing these results to other universities or colleges may not be appropriate. Several racial incidents involving non-Asians occurred at this institution at the beginning of the academic year when the surveys were distributed. This current study was conceived before the incidents occurred. The effect of these

incidents on the attitudes of professionals toward racial minorities is unknown. It can be assumed, however, that these incidents may have led to more socially desirable responses or more heightened sensitivity toward racial/ethnic groups. While the SAS methodology controls for social desirability, it is still a concern.

Implications for Practice

One of the clear implications would be to provide training for staff so that they can better understand their own attitudes and how they affect Asian American students. Without increased attention to the campus environment that is created through these held stereotypes, students will continue to feel the powerful impact of prejudice. With the large number of Asian American students on the campus studied (14%), the ultimate effect on the campus environment could be substantial. Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) suggest a six stage model for eliminating racism that moves from understanding cultural and racial differences, through understanding racism and racial attitudes, to examining the effects of those attitudes and eventually being able to set goals and develop strategies for change.

Improved programs for Asian American students on handling prejudice can also be developed from results of this study. There is evidence that the ability of students of color, including Asian Americans, to handle racism and prejudice correlates with their success in school (Sedlacek, 1999). This study provides some information on what may be included in part of such training. Dealing with apparently positive stereotypes is not a typical way for Asian American students or student affairs professionals developing programs to think of diversity issues.

Additional research on how attitudes toward Asian Americans may differ by gender and other situational or geographical settings may prove fruitful and lead to other programming possibilities.

Further research should explore how Asian Americans perceive the attitudes or behaviors of student affairs professional and faculty members. This research would help faculty and staff better understand how their attitudes are perceived by Asian American students. Sensitivity to these student perceptions may result in more effective practices in the classroom as well as in student services. Another recommendation for further research in this area is to examine feelings toward different Asian ethnic groups and the implications of those feelings for student and staff programming.

Additional work on issues affecting Asian Americans is needed in many areas. In the meantime we hope the results of this study may provide some content for additional perspectives and program planning that can help Asian American students and the professionals that work with them.

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Table 1

Student Services Questionnaire Situation Mean and Standard Deviation Scores by Form

		Asian American			F Value[b]	Neutral	
Situation[a]		M	SD	p	(1, 57)	M	SD
#1	A new student employee asks you for a personal loan.	27.69	5.69	.19	1.76	25.63	6.12
#2	A student is worried about how his/her parents will react to his/her decision to switch majors.	40.20	4.65	.11	2.68	42.25	4.83
#3	A student offers to fix your computer.	38.11	5.31	.05*	3.95	35.42	4.82
#4	You see a group of students studying on a Friday night.	37.86	3.93	.40	0.73	37.00	3.54
#5	You see a group of young men loitering by your car.	29.91	5.07	.00*	24.11	22.88	5.88
#6	A student has trouble communicating his/her concerns to you.	35.60	4.76	.36	0.87	36.88	5.71
#7	After a lengthy search process, the University's president has announced the selection of a new vice president of student affairs.	36.00	3.96	.05*	3.99	33.96	3.69
#8	A student organization holds a rally demanding more funding for their programs.	34.83	4.13	.54	0.37	35.58	5.35
#9	The University has successfully recruited basketball player.	36.11	5.61	.94	0.00	36.00	6.46
#10	You notice that a member of a committee that you are on does not contribute or speak up during meetings.	30.11	5.22	.55	0.37	29.13	7.29
#11	A student you work with is upset about a "B+" they received on an exam.	32.77	3.14	.46	0.55	33.58	5.23
#12	Your best female friend has just become engaged (to an Asian American).	42.09	7.12	.71	0.13	42.75	6.34

[a]See Appendices A and B for complete wording of situations; [b]Wilks Lambda = .569; F= 2.90; *p≤ .05;
Note. Scale Ranges: 50 = most positive attitudes; 10 = most negative attitudes